

# **Supply of Labour to Bengal Tea Industry, 1900-1939**

**Author: Iftikhar-ul-Awwal**

**Publication date: 1979**

**Journal: Bangladesh Historical Studies**

**Volume: 4**

**Pages: 49-63**

## SUPPLY OF LABOUR TO BENGAL TEA INDUSTRY, 1900-1939

Iftikhar-ul Awwal

Much has been written about the scarcity of labour supply to mills, factories, mines and plantations in India during the twentieth century. Such shortages in the labour supply have been identified with various causes. One of the commonest was the belief that the Indians were determinedly immobile and therefore to get adequate supply of labour they had to be coaxed and humoured all the time.<sup>1</sup> To this cause was also attributed the growing poverty of the people with which they were threatened.<sup>2</sup> But the myth of labour immobility does not stand up to test in view of the large emigration of indentured coolies from India to overseas colonies like Fiji, Malay States, Natal, Trinidad, Jamaica, Dutch and British Guiana, Mauritius, Ceylon, etc., where labour was attracted by higher wages and better standards of life.<sup>3</sup> Nor was it valid to say as was claimed by Messrs

---

1 *The Statesman* June, 17, 1909, p. 6., *Ibid.*, February 2, 1921.

2 *The Friend of India and Statesman* April 7, 1897, p. 19. See, Letter to the Editor by "A".

3 The system of indentured coolies for labour outside India dated from 1842, their employment being regulated by an Emigration Act passed in 1883. The annual supply varied greatly, being dependent on the agricultural conditions prevailing in India, but it was officially estimated that some 10,000 emigrants were despatched yearly under average conditions. A considerable number of coolies settled in the countries to which they were sent after the end of their term of indenture, only 4,000 to 5,000 returning to India in any average year (*The Times*, March 22, 1916 p. 7). The main reason for such large-scale emigration was eco-

Bird and Company of Calcutta that Government of India's famine relief work competed with the supply of unskilled labour<sup>4</sup> or the claim that Indian labour was unresponsive to the stimulus of higher pay.<sup>5</sup> The fact was that, as Sir Henry Cotton pointed out, there had been no shortage of labour in India but the supply always exceeded the demand, and whatever difficulty there might have been among capitalists in obtaining labour was due entirely to their own reluctance to pay higher market rate or wages which the increased cost of living had made inevitable.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the *Times* also pointed out:<sup>7</sup> "It is often said that, whereas in many countries the supply of labour exceeds the demand, in India the demand exceeds the supply. But this is not strictly accurate. India has an immense mass of potential labour, and the supply is probably more elastic than in countries in a more advanced stage of industrial development. An increase in the rewards offered to labour does not fail to evoke a fairly rapid response, and the rewards offered have not always been the highest that the industry could bear."

In addition to wages, labour supply also to a very great extent depended upon the conditions of work. Such conditions included a host of factors a more kindly and sympathetic management, better housing, congenial working

---

conomic and their hopes were more than realized (*Indian Planters' Gazette and Sporting News*, October 28, 1905, p. 525. The Government of India, however, by their Defence of India (Consolidation) Rules, 1915 prohibited the emigration, except by licence, of all unskilled labour "for the purpose of or with the intention of labouring for hire" in 1917. *The Statesman*. March 30, 1921, p. 9.

4 *The Friend of India and Statesman*, July 26, 1900, pp. 5 & 19.

5 *The Statesman*, March 26, 1921, pp. 3—4.

6 *Indian Planters' Gazette and Sporting News*, August 1, 1914, p. 174  
Henceforth *IPG*

7 *The Times* (Supplement), November 17, 1921, p. XI.

hours, the healthiness of a place, the supply of good and sufficient filtered water, accessibility to a good bazaar, and freedom from interference.

In this paper we propose to study the question of labour supply in the tea industry of Bengal in relation to wages and conditions of work and will endeavour to find out how far those factors were conducive to the supply of labour and to what degrees.

# I

Among the organized industries of Bengal, tea ranked only second to jute in the number of persons employed. The two principal districts which contained virtually all the tea plantations were Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. Ever since tea plantations started in Bengal in the 1850's its growth had been phenomenal (the industry was first started in Bengal as a commercial enterprise in Darjeeling in 1856). In 1870, there were only 56 gardens with 11,000 acres under tea cultivation, employing some 8,000 labourers in Darjeeling district and by 1905, there were 148 tea gardens with an acreage of over 50,000. The number of persons employed in 1901 amounted to 64,000 coolies.<sup>8</sup> The growth of Jalpaiguri gardens was even more spectacular. From 13 gardens with an acreage of 818 in 1876, the total number of gardens rose to 235 in 1901 with an acreage of 76,403 and employing some 90,000 persons.<sup>9</sup>

In the early stages of its development, however, the tea gardens of Bengal did not face much of a difficulty in securing adequate supplies of labour. Darjeeling could always count on the Nepali Coolies while Dooars recruited aborigines from the Chota-Nagpur division in addition to its

---

8 Bengal District Gazetteers, *Darjeeling* (Calcutta, 1907), pp. 74—75.

9 Bengal District Gazetteers, *Jalpaiguri* (Allahabad, 1911), pp. 102-03.

local supplies. As years passed, this equilibrium was however tilted against it by severe competition for labour supply from private and public bodies, including the government. As one correspondent commented regarding Dooars 1900:<sup>10</sup>

"Good coolies, as any one who keeps his eyes open can see, are yearly becoming more and more difficult to get. Railway and other contractors are competing for the same class of labour as the tea gardens employ, and their competition is even more seriously affecting the very limited source of supply, than Assam or other tea districts."

Against this sort of competition, the only alternative was to pay sufficiently attractive wages, which however the tea industry was not willing to offer or as was claimed "the scarcity of money has hitherto acted as something of a set-off to the scarcity of labour".<sup>11</sup> The actual rate of money wages was already low as could be seen from Table 1.1. Even this nominal amount could not be earned by an average coolie as was reported by the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri, Mr. Forrest. According to him, the average earnings of a male coolie amounted to Rs. 4-14 annas

**Table 1.1. Actual prevailing monthly money wage in the tea gardens at Bengal, c. 1900.**

	Darjeeling		Duars			
	Rs.	As.	Rs.	As.	Rs.	As.
Men	5	8	6	0	6	0
Women	4	8	4	8	4	5

Source : India Office Record : Vol. 5851, Bengal General Proceedings (Emigration), October 1900, No. 29, p. 187.

10 *IPG*, December 15, 1900, pp. 596—97. See, Letter to the Editor by "Shareholder".

11 *Ibid.*, February 9, 1907, p. 151.

which included overtime payment of Rs. 1-0-3 pies or in other words the mean percentage of his extra earnings on *hajiri* earnings was 26. Similarly, women coolies earned on an average Rs.3-2-7, which included overtime payment of Rs.0-8-5. On the other hand, the average earnings of a child was Rs. 1-3-3 and overtime of Rs.0-2-9, or a total of Rs.1-6-0.<sup>12</sup> In calculating their average earnings it must also be remembered that they also paid the expenses of their journey from their own pocket. The rate of wages prevailing in 1900 did not undergo any major changes till 1914 when it was resolved in a meeting of the Dooars Planters' Association that "greater liberality in recruiting terms seems called for in view of the extension of free labour in other tea districts, and the consequent increase in competition", and it was left to the individual garden to decide for itself what further inducements it could offer to its labour.<sup>13</sup> But next year it was finally agreed by the Dooars Planters' Association that 4 annas, 3 annas and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  annas *hajiri* should be considered as a maximum which should be exceeded by no garden save by general agreement.<sup>14</sup> The rates fixed in 1915 appear to have remained stationary till 1919. On the other hand, the changes in the wage structure in Darjeeling and Terai, if anything was nil or insignificant. The Darjeeling rate of wages for men which was below that of Dooars and Terai was made at par at Rs. 6.<sup>15</sup>

While money wages in the tea gardens remained almost stationary, the real wages of the coolies had been dropping fast, specially since 1906 owing to the high prices of food-grains. Rice formerly obtainable at Rs. 3 per maund was

---

12 India Office Record, Vol. 5851, Bengal General Proceeding, (Emigration), October 1900, Nos.24—25, p. 190.

13 IPG, August 15, 1914, p.254.

14 *Ibid.*, November 20, 191, p. 549.

15 Bengal District Gazetteers, *Darjeeling* (Calcutta, 1907), p. 84.

now usually as high as Rs. 7, and had even touched the famine rate of As. 10.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, *bhoota* price which was about As. 12 per maund at the cheapest season rose to Rs. 2-4 during similar period.<sup>17</sup> Under these condition it was naturally impossible for a family earning perhaps Rs. 16 to Rs. 20 per month, and consisting of four working members, with say two non-working children, to live on their pay.<sup>18</sup> The result was that due to the inability of coolies to earn a living wage, there was a great exodus of labour to Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan to grow crops for which there was a demand in the Indian market. As was rightly pointed out.<sup>19</sup> "The terms on which work is to be had are no longer tempting enough to bring coolies of the right stamp from Nepal, for the increase in necessary expenditure is such as to leave them no better off on tea gardens than they would be in their own homes."

Theoretically, such a state of affairs—demand for labour on the one hand and scarcity of supply on the other—should have led to higher wage rates, until by the extinction of

16 *IPG*, March 7, 1908, p. 309.

17 *Ibid.* September 26, 1908, p. 445.

18 To off-set the effect of price spiral, many of the tea gardens like the Teesta Valley, gave their coolies small plots of *Khets* to cultivate which not only gave an increase to their wages but attached them to the soil. But such concessions were severely opposed by a good number of tea gardens which did not have sufficient land to give and as a result of which they already faced additional difficulty in procuring labour.

19 See, "A Note of the Crying Evils of Darjeeling Labour and their necessary remedies, *IPG*, March 7, 1908, p. 309. In effect on account of the difficulties of transport the price of foodgrains in Nepal was exceedingly low—as low as 12 annas a maund for rice. It was therefore not unnatural that the Nepalese in their own valleys should have preferred to stay at home. India Office Record, Vol. 8139, Bengal General Proceedings (Emigration), October 1909, No. 30, p. 102.

the least profitable gardens and an increase in the supply of labour, an equilibrium were established. That this did not take place was due to a number of reasons—the imperfect mobility of labour, combination of a formal or informal character among the managers, and finally the “superintendent” system which was almost universal in the Dooars.

The imperfect mobility of labour in the tea estates can be assigned to the facilities offered in individual gardens. Although a certain percentage of coolies moved freely enough from garden to garden, there was a very considerable residuum, more especially in the long-established gardens, who did not find it necessary to move. In these gardens one found numbers of coolie who had become permanent residents. They had been living in the same plot of land for a number of years and had a house superior to those found in the coolie lines, with a well cultivated plot of land of their own on the garden property. Migration to another garden would have entailed the loss of all this and naturally it took a great deal of inducement for them to move. Another factor which militated against movement was that most of the garden coolies were indebted to their sirdars (who obtained loans from *mahajans* or garden proprietors) and therefore could not go elsewhere till such loans were cleared. Moreover, it was also a common practise in most gardens to provide advances to their coolies on recruitment. To protect the industry against fraud on the part of the indebted labour (and to protect gardens from enticement of labour by their neighbours) the various tea district associations also drew up “Labour Rules” which ensured the garden against the movement of coolies.<sup>20</sup> The monopoly powers claimed by the Darjeeling Planters’ Association made matters worse. This they claimed in view of the fact

---

20 A typical “Labour Rules” was that of the Darjeeling Planters’ Association, which was as follows—:

that since labourers from the plains were unwilling to come to the hills for outdoor work of any kind, Nepal had been the only recruiting ground possible from which they could obtain their labour.<sup>21</sup> But the Nepalese saw it otherwise, as a result of which "the district is soothing with dissatisfaction, the coolies at not being allowed to go to the, as promised, El Dorado and the planters are losing their labourers."<sup>22</sup>

When we turn to formal and informal combinations, we find that the wages of coolie were fixed by the Calcutta agency houses in conjunction with the members of planting organizations. Those which did not belong to such organi-

- 
- 1 Coolies bolt from garden called "A" to a garden called "B".
  - 2 (a) A writes within three months requesting the coolies to be returned. B must return the coolies. If they refuse to go, B must see that they are not allowed to work on his garden.
  - (b) A writes within three months, but says that if the coolies are not willing to return, he will accept the money owed by them. B may then turn the coolies out or pay the money owed, whichever he prefers, but he must do one or the other.
  - 3 A does not write until more than three months have elapsed, B may pay the money owed or turn out the coolies, whichever he prefers, but he must do one or the other.
  - 4 If more than six months elapse before A write, B is not bound to assist in any way.
  - 5 Should any case come up which is not covered by the foregoing rules, or should the two parties concerned not be able to agree, the question is to be referred to the Members of the Committee elected in the Sub-District concerned from whose decision there is to be no appeal." See, *IPG*, May 8, 1909, P. 626.
  - 21 India Office Record, Vol. 8139, Bengal General Proceeding (Emigration), October 1909, Nos. 28-29, p. 97.
  - 22 *The Statesman*, December 19, 1912, pp, 7-8. See, Letter to the Editor by "A Darjeeling Planter".

zations. Those which did not belong to such organizations usually had an understanding with the neighbouring gardens as to this. Therefore, it was virtually impossible to act alone in the matter of wages even if one wished so. In this regard, the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri had this to say.<sup>23</sup>

“Managers of neighbouring garden as a rule tacitly or explicitly agree to give a certain rate for a certain quantity of labour, and this is usually adhered to, and of course those gardens which belong to the Duars Tea Association have to conform to the general rates fixed by this body. The greater number of gardens in the Duars do belong to the Association.”

Not only did the planters keep the wages low and uniform throughout the tea districts by combined action, they even did not like others (i. e., government) to recruit from within the tea districts and thereby cause labour discontentment as government rates were far better than theirs.<sup>24</sup>

The “superintendent” system was most prevalent in the Duars. A company owing 10 to 20 different gardens, or a combination of private proprietors, appointed a planter of experience and ability on a large salary to superintend a number of gardens and put him in a position of authority over the individual managers. The superintendent was constantly travelling and inspecting the gardens in his charge, he compared the *nirikhs* of one garden with another, and this comparison enabled him to cut down expenses to the lowest possible limit. The system was a great check on the effect of competition for labour among managers, as any attempt

---

23 India Office Record, Vol. 5851, Bengal General Proceedings (Emigration), October 1900, Nos. 21-22, p. 185.

24 See, Minute of the proceedings of the extraordinary meeting of the Committee of the Darjeeling Planters' Association, IPG, June 6, 1914, p. 880.

on the part of an individual manager to raise the price of labour in his garden was severely scrutinized by the superintendent who required a full explanation of any difference in in the *nirikhs* of the various gardens under his superintendence.

After the war, however, some changes in the wage structure seemed called for. Already the coolie were feeling the effect of the rise in prices which war brought about in the daily necessities of life like cloth and salt and which often led to the looting of private and government bazaars by garden coolies.<sup>25</sup> To off-set rising costs of living, new scales were introduced in the Duars with effect from 1 January 1920, enhancing wages to a daily rate of four annas for men and three annas for women.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in Darjeeling rates were also improved.<sup>27</sup> The wages went up further in the 1920's as the Royal Commission on Labour (1931) found the average monthly earnings in Duars in 1929 to be Rs.14-4-1 for men, Rs.10-5-8 for women and Rs.2-14-5 for children. In Darjeeling the minimum earning of an ordinary worker was about 7 annas 6 pies a day for men, 6 annas for women and 2 annas 9 pies for children.<sup>28</sup> These later wage increases were probably on account of increased cost of living and more effective competition for labour from all quarters, including Assam which now recruited upon the same free labour sardary system under the control

---

25 *IPG*, February 9, 1918, p. 158.

26 *Ibid*, December 20, 1919, p. 732.

27 *The Statesman*, June 1, 1922, p. 15.

28 *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India* (Parliamentary Paper XI of 1930-31), p. 1013. After 1920, the *hajiri* rate of payment at least so far as Duars was concerned remained stationary—4 annas for a man and 3 annas for women & children. The increased average earnings was due to the policy of the gardens to decrease the tasks by introducing a system of second and even a third *hajiri*. Percival Griffiths *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), p. 310.

of a semi-official organization with a senior government official as its Chairman. The increased rate of wages also seemed to have minimised the problem of labour scarcity so often complained of by the 1920's.<sup>29</sup>

## II

The condition of work in the tea plantations were not also always pleasant. The single most predominant factor, apart from wages which militated against the supply of labour was undoubtedly the question of the sanitation of the place. The tea districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri had been regarded as particularly unhealthy districts due to widespread prevalence of malaria. To the superficial observer the connection between malaria and inadequate labour supply might not be apparent, but planters who had studied the question and the general body of medical men, were convinced that one of the main reasons for this inadequacy was the intensely malarious nature of the climate in the principal tea growing districts.<sup>30</sup> "Among the permanent residents", observed the Dooars Planters' Association "attacks of malarial fever are frequent, among visitors to the Duars in the malarial season there are but

---

29 In 1924, the Dooars and Teri agency houses also made arrangements under which the task of recruiting was delegated to the Tea Districts Labour Association and the industry placed itself voluntarily under the supervision of a Committee of Control in Calcutta with ample powers to put a stop to anything in the way of recruiting that was not entirely satisfactory (*The Statesman*, March 19, 1925, p. 12) Earlier, only a few Dooars concerns used to recruit through this Association. One of the principal deferents that influenced certain Dooars interests from joining the Association was that they were not willing to pay higher recruiting costs involved in such operations. *The Statesman*, October 12, 1921, p. 19,

30 *The friend of India and Statesman*, December 10, 1908, p. 5.

few who can boast that they got scathless away ... even if a fatal termination be avoided, result in constitutional debilitation or permanent loss of health".<sup>31</sup> This, from an economical point of view was more important than deaths, for it was the amount and duration of sickness rather than the mortality that fell on the prosperity of a community.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to malaria, there existed other fevers, probably enteric fever, Kala-zar, Pneumonic and even Phthisis for which there had been no special remedy till then.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 1.2. Annual mortality rate ( per mille ) in the tea districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, 1898 to 1904.**

Year	Provincial death rate	Jalpaiguri	Darjeeling
1898	26.57	33.40	39.73
1899	31.21	34.45	40.30
1900	36.63	45.20	49.67
1901	31.04	33.05	39.15
1902	33.43	33.67	36.10
1903	33.33	33.15	39.20
1904	32.45	34.85	39.54

Source : India Office Record, V/14/76, Twenty Years' Statistics, V,—Sanitation pp, 2, 28—29,

31 Memorandum by the Dooars Planters' Association to His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam, IPG, January 19, 1907, p. 75.

32 *Census of India, 1911*, Vol. V, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, part I, Report (Calcutta, 1913), p. 70. In some of the gardens, overwhelming proportion of the Coolies were afflicted with malaria (like that of Chalouni, Debpara, Gurjangehora, Moorlee, Toorsa) as could be seen from the Statistics of malarial treatment. See, *Annual Report on the Working of the Jalpaiguri Labour Act, 1912, for the year ending 30th June 1915*, Appendix, Table III, pp. VII—VIII. The series is henceforth referred to as Jalpaiguri Labour Report.

33 *Jalpaiguri Labour Report*, 1913-14, p. 3.

All these diseases, together with others like dysentery and Cholera brought a heavy death fall on the coolies (See, Table 1.2) which acted as a deterrent on the minds of others'' for no man comes gladly to a district of such evil repute, and this cause must militate against efficiency of administration and industrial development. The prevalence of the feeling of alarm, the widespread notoriety of the Dooars, are facts too patent to demand confirmation.''<sup>34</sup> If Dooars mortality rate was high, Darjeeling's was only higher as the hill coolies (Paharias) were more susceptible to diseases than the Madesis (Plains Coolies).<sup>35</sup>

To improve the health conditions of the Dooars, the Government of Bengal passed the Jalpaiguri Labour Act, 1912 which came into force in April 1913 and under which the civil surgeon of the district was made the Inspector of tea estates. From his annual reports, it appears that public health had gradually improved, especially in the years from 1920 onwards by the appointment of medical personnel in most gardens and by regular treatment of malaria and other fevers. The death rate which had been appreciably higher started to climb downwards.<sup>36</sup>

Working conditions in the tea industry were also not always pleasant. In the rainy months, wet grounds caused

---

34 *IPG*, January 19, 1907, p. 75.

35 *Jalpaiguri Labour Report*, 1914-15, p. 3.

36 This could be seen from the figures of mortality (per mille) noted below :

Year	Deaths in tea gardens
1918—19	47.86
1919—20	31.75
1920—21	29.15
1921—22	24.93
1922—23	25.54
1923—24	29.21
1924—25	26.72

See, *Report on the working of the Jalpaiguri Labour Act for the year ending 30th June 1919* (Calcutta, 1919) and Subsequent annual issues til 1924-25.

ulcers of the feet and legs which resulted in more sickness than malarial fever and an enormous loss of labour.<sup>37</sup> There was also the cruel practice fortunately not general, of keeping labour out all day, when it was excessively wet or cold. This greatly disheartened the coolies and the resultant sickness distressed and frightened them.<sup>38</sup> Nor were the conditions of work within the factories entirely satisfactory. In many cases, the atmosphere was impregnated with tea fluff and the women and children employed therein worked with a cloth tied round their mouths and nostrils. These conditions obtained more in hill factories where windows had to be closed on account of mist and dampness which would otherwise spoil the tea. Such dust, acting as an irritant, probably caused throat and lung diseases.<sup>39</sup> Other factors affecting labour supply were probably the bad state of housing in Jalpaiguri, which were in effect nothing but primitive huts without plinth., and interference in their way of life, i. e, working labour on bazaar day, restricting leave on festival, etc. The explanation for the desertion of a large number of coolies, sometimes in batches just after despatch could perhaps be found in the prevailing conditions of work in the tea estates.

### Conclusion :

Among the larger organized industries of Bengal, i. e., Jute, tea and Coal., wages were lowest in the tea plantations,<sup>40</sup> It was this low wages coupled with bad working conditions

---

37 *Jalpaiguri Labour Report*, Bengal, 1913—14, p. 4.

38 *IPG*, January 21, 1905, p. 58.

39 *Annual Factory Report*, Bengal, 1928, p. 7.

40 A.Z.M. Iftikhar-ul-Awwal, *The Industrial Development of Bengal, 1900-1939: an examination of the economic features of an underdeveloped area* (unpublished ph.D. Thesis, London University, 1978), p. 153.

obtaining in the plantations which generally limited the optimum supply of labour in this industry. As result, to retain labour, measures akin to surfdom (i. e., Labour Rules, monopoly powers of employment in Darjeeling, etc.) had to be resorted to and in spite of all these, could not command the full employment of coolies, However, from about the middle of the 1920's when wages and other conditions of work had substantially improved in the tea industry that the problem of inadequate labour supply seems to have been overcome.